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SUBJECT: EMBASSY AIR QUALITY TWEETS SAID TO "CONFUSE" CHINESE
PUBLIC

SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. At the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), ESTH Off and MED Off met on July 7 with Mr. WANG Shuai of MFA's Office of U.S. Affairs to respond to MFA's concerns about recent publicity in international and local press surrounding an air quality monitor installed on the Embassy compound. MFA registered complaints on behalf of the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) and the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), saying that making this data (which in their view "conflicts" with "official" data posted by the Beijing EPB) available to the general public through an Embassy-operated Twitter site has caused "confusion" and undesirable "social consequences" among the Chinese public. MFA asked Post to consider either limiting access to the air quality data only to American citizens, or otherwise identify a suitable compromise. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) BACKGROUND: In February 2008, Post purchased and installed a MetOne BAM 1020 continuous particulate monitor at the former Embassy compound to measure the concentration of particulate matter (PM) 2.5 in the area. In August 2008 the Embassy began posting corresponding "real time" air quality index (AQI) numbers, which are generated according to definitions set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to an Embassy-managed Twitter site (<http://twitter.com/beijingair>) on an hourly basis. While the initiative originally was primarily geared toward informing the Embassy community about levels of pollution in immediate proximity to the compound, consular "no double standard" requirements prompted Post to create the Twitter site as a user-friendly platform so that private American citizens residing and traveling in Beijing are also able to access the data. (NOTE: Particulates less than 2.5 micrometers in diameter (PM 2.5) are referred to as "fine" particulates and are widely-accepted to pose the largest risk to human health. Beijing EPB currently has the capacity to collect PM 2.5 data, but the agency only chooses to make available to the public data on PM 10 (10 micrometers in diameter), and links the PM 10 data to Beijing EPB's own "Air Pollution Index (API)" definitions. Beijing EPB only publishes one daily average to describe the previous 24-hour period and then offers a "forecast" for the day to come. From a public health perspective, air quality data posted after the fact offers non-actionable information of little value to area residents, who want guidance on appropriate levels of outdoor physical activity on a given day. END NOTE)

¶2. (SBU) While the existence of the Embassy's air quality Twitter site had become increasingly known to the American expatriate population living in Beijing throughout the spring, local and international press coverage spiked after Time Magazine published a story online about the Embassy's air monitor on June 19. Since June 19, the site's number of "followers" has increased from approximately 400 to the current total of 2500+, with at least 75 percent of the new followers being Chinese (judging from the screen

names used). Additional press articles have appeared in the South China Morning Post, China Daily, and other outlets, with major local online forums like Sina.com ablaze with Chinese "netizens" commenting on this issue. (NOTE: The increased number of registered followers probably only partially reflects the new interest that exists among internet users in Twitter site's measurements. Since the site is open also to unregistered users, or "non-followers," a great many more likely access the site without first registering as a follower. END NOTE) END BACKGROUND

TWITTER'S ACCESSIBILITY MAY CAUSE "SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES"

13. (SBU) It was in this context that EmbOffs were summoned to MFA on July 7 to listen to the Chinese government's list of complaints about the existence, function, and reach of the Embassy's air quality Twitter site. Interlocutors appeared willing to accept the Embassy's stated rationale that the monitor is needed for mission community health purposes. WANG Shuai of MFA's U.S. Affairs Office stated that MFA, nevertheless, remains unhappy that the Embassy decided to make the data available also to the general public via the Twitter site. EmbOff explained the United States' consular "no double standard" regulations, which require the Embassy to share with American citizens any available information related to security and health.

14. (SBU) Wang then wondered, if the target audience included only Embassy personnel, family members, and American citizens in the area, why the information needed to be broadcast to the general public and made accessible to the Chinese public as well. He stated that the Embassy Twitter site had been causing unwanted "press fuss," and "confusion" among the Chinese public, which might lead to

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"social consequences." Wang further commented that air quality data should not follow a "market-based" approach, which has resulted in the Chinese public now questioning "unnecessarily" the validity of Beijing EPB's data. In MFA's view, Beijing EPB should be the sole authoritative voice for making pronouncements on Beijing's air quality. He then requested that the Embassy explore ways to limit access to data collected from the Embassy's machine to only mission members and American citizens.

COMPETING AIR QUALITY DATA: "NOT FAIR" TO EPB

15. (SBU) According to Wang, the existence of the machine and the openness of the Twitter site are "not fair" to the Beijing EPB. He cited that the Twitter site's consistent characterization in recent days of Beijing air quality as "unhealthy" or "very unhealthy" takes credit away from "all the progress" Beijing EPB has made in recent years in improving the city's air quality. Wang added that the fact that the Embassy's air quality data is not based on the Chinese-approved standards for measuring air pollution is not only confusing but also insulting, citing that the U.S. government would be similarly incensed if the Chinese Embassy in Washington were to do the same. Wang concluded by again urging that if data could not be limited to Americans only, the Embassy should identify a "compromise." Ultimately, MFA would "hate to see" the bilateral environmental cooperation or even the overall relationship negatively "affected by this issue."

16. (SBU) EmbOff emphasized to MFA interlocutors that the Embassy's primary interest is to make the information collected by the air monitor as easily-accessible by Mission personnel, family members, and Americans residing and traveling in Beijing as possible. Therefore, the Embassy has no position on non-American citizens also having access to the data, nor is the Embassy concerned with how others choose to interpret the information found on the Twitter site. The Embassy does, however, have a strong interest in "setting the record straight," and ensuring that the public understands that mission health has always been and remains the primary motivation for the program. Furthermore, because the Embassy's monitor only collects data in one location, it cannot replace or negate the information provided by the Beijing EPB. Finally, since the Embassy collects data on PM 2.5 and Beijing EPB on PM 10, and each is

indexed differently, the two indices cannot and should not be compared. Therefore, until the Beijing EPB begins publishing PM 2.5 data (which they already have the equipment to collect) on a real time basis, the Embassy is not able to discontinue its program for monitoring PM 2.5 onsite.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) Although the exchanges at the meeting became heated at times, EmbOffs perceived that the interlocutors were likely only dutifully registering disapproval on behalf of national and city environmental protection authorities. EmbOffs promised to relay MFA's concerns to relevant sections of the Embassy to see if a compromise could be identified, however, Post does not feel at this time that MFA presented any compelling arguments to warrant drastic changes in or discontinuation of the Embassy's PM 2.5 monitoring program.

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